

So you bought your diploma?

Private education in Croatia in the context of  
post-communism

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**Abstract:**

Following the Homeland War and fall of the communist regime new private higher education institutions sprouted along Croatia and Eastern Europe. While accepted by governments in their inception and often incentivized in their establishment they are yet to be completely accepted by the public. In order to better understand their struggle for legitimacy a survey was issued to the Croatian public to learn what does it seek in a 'good university'. The Kano model was used to survey 67 participants using convenience sampling in various locations of the countries capital. Results show a consensus on what are the fundamental requirements for the institution but differ on what will enhance their performance and make them attractive. A clear path can be structured to appease the diverse groups that arose.

So you bought your diploma?

### Private education in Croatia in the context of post-communism

Europe has a long standing tradition of public funded universities, be it church or state and Croatia is no different. The oldest Croatian university is the University of Zadar, founded in 1396. The longest continuously operating university is the University of Zagreb operating since 1669.

The concept of a private university is new to Central Eastern Europe and only arrived with the fall of the Berlin Wall. The private non-profit university was welcomed by the state – often even subsidized by the governments. They were needed in order to quickly and efficiently prepare the public for the new and great job market. These universities came in wanting to be different and they made sure the public was aware.

As such American universities insisted on clearly stating they were indeed American and not related to the status quo what so ever by adopting the title 'American' in their name. Other examples include 'German' or 'European'.

This was especially important because most public universities through communism (and even after) have had great struggles with nepotism, corruption and even selling of diplomas (Slantcheva, 2007). This issue was so great that Estonian and Bulgarian governments had to implement nationwide testing to crack down on the habit. Slantcheva found that up to 80% of students in the most elite Estonian universities were enrolled thanks to connections and bribery.

Private institutions could then use their integrity to show legitimacy in what is perhaps the truest form of the word for they would not be bribed or bargained with.

However the private institution still struggles with legitimacy with Croatians being especially skeptical. Here the notion of the private university is younger still as the first institutions arrived only 20 years ago. Private higher education enrolled as low as 3.0% of all Croatian students in the academic year of 2004/2005 (Slantcheva, 2007)

It is important to add that in post communist Europe there exists a strong notion that even formally non-profit organizations pursue financial gain (Nicolescu, 2007) and therefore a high tuition brings forth skeptics especially as public universities remain the first choice among the most privileged students (Slantcheva, 2007). While this is something that can be with combated with relative ease it brings us to a much deeper problem with which the private institution in this region and that's a real and true clash of civilizations.

European Universities follow Alexander von Humboldt's (Humboldt University of Berlin) doctrine which states that the professor is not at the university for the student nor is the student at the university for the professor, they are both members of the institution for science (Slantcheva, 2007). This school of thought albeit perhaps outdated has been followed and maintained by near all European universities by focusing on research first and everything else second.

There is other evidence that shows just how strong the roots of this mindset are in Central Eastern Europe and Europe in general. In 2004 UNESCO made a public claim stating that the insurgence of 'new higher education institutions' does not go in line with Europe's long standing tradition and way of doing.

The rector of the oldest Bulgarian university stated in 2005 that higher education does not exist to ease the job finding for its students and most private universities focus on exactly that with near all degrees offered being in business, banking, marketing and law.

After stating all of this it is obvious to see why private universities in the region and Croatia struggle, but what can be done to fight this?

Snejana Slantheva wrote a book in 2007 called "*Private Higher Education in Post-Communist Europe: In search of legitimacy*" in which she recognizes 3 main sources of legitimacy for higher private education.

Those are: State, Academia and Market.

In order to gain legitimacy and future alumni private education has to focus on these three pillars in different ways.

The state appointed legitimacy is perhaps the most simple one to understand and gain (at least it should be) for it is nothing more than bureaucratic procedures done in order to gain the necessary paperwork and accreditations for the university and its professors to work undisturbed.

The academic legitimacy is harder to pinpoint and obtain which is perhaps best explained by the phenomena of "*isomorphism*".

Isomorphism is what happens when universities try to emulate already existing practices (from well established public universities) in order to gain acceptance from the public by offering them something that is tried and true. This includes hiring professors from public universities who in turn bring the public university curriculum and general way of doing. This approach, while it can bring some form of legitimacy by easing the public with something its familiar with often comes at the cost of losing the personal mission and statement the private institution held (Slantheva 2007).

This loss of a personal mission statement is especially frightening to Giesecke (2007) who states that one of the best ways for a private institution to gain legitimacy is to have a defining '*star quality*' that sets it apart from the rest.

Furthermore some of the practices being emulated (high failure rates, professor PhDs and publications, large class sizes) are not necessarily what the public, the final edge of the triangle of legitimacy, truly want. This is supported by Slantcheva's findings from 2007 that shows that up to one third of students in Poland, Estonia and Romania enroll in private education specifically to avoid some of the public institution practices.

A major reason for this as Slantcheva and her co-authors found is the fact that in these countries students from private institutions found a job within the first year of graduation with a 90% success rate. When comparing those numbers with less than 20% for their public counterparts the shift in priorities makes sense.

The market legitimacy is the one given by the students who enroll and the employees that hire them. This means that a university could meet the bare minimum state requirements and be looked down upon by all the other public universities for not doing enough research, not having enough publications and yet persevere through the people (market) that recognize its value.

This brings us to the concept of “*niche legitimacy*” introduced again by Slantcheva with which an university can exist and be successful without mimicking others, without giving up on their mission and statement and tuition and without having to hire the professors anyone but them thinks they need to hire.

“*Niche Legitimacy*” focuses on a small number of students who recognize the value of the university and a small number of firms and business that recognize the value of their alumni. Slantcheva focuses briefly on it in her book of a similar topic and we will expand further on it and try to find out which universities would benefit most from it and how it can be achieved.

Supply and demand dictate all markets and the higher education market is no different. We then ventured forth to try and find out what does the Croatian public want from a university.

## **Method:**

In order to learn what the public believes makes a good university, and if private universities fall in line with the public's expectations and desires a survey and a poll were issued.

The survey used the Kano model created by Japanese professor Noriaki Kano in the 1980s. The Kano model was developed in order to better understand customers perspectives on product features and as such was a great fit for trying to determine which elements are most important in an university. The Kano model clusters responses in 5 categories: Attractive, One-Dimensional, Must-Be, Indifferent and Reverse.

Attractive are those elements that a customer doesn't expect and their existence brings him satisfaction and joy. This falls in line with what Slantcheva and her co-authors call an universities 'Star Quality'.

One-Dimensional elements are best explained by saying: The more the better. The less gas a car uses or the longer a battery can last. These elements are most often used when creating slogans. Ex: Walmart '*Always low prices*'.

Must-Be elements are those that do not bring any bonus satisfaction to the customer but the lack of thereof brings the satisfaction down. Examples are the steering wheel on a car or a tidy room in a hotel – something obvious and expected.

Indifferent elements don't evoke any positive or negative feelings in the customer.

Reverse elements are those that one will be punished for having.



The survey itself consisted of 14 statements paired in 'functional' and 'dysfunctional' form. For example: 'Students can be creative in their work' and 'Students are dissuaded from being creative'. The participants are then tasked with giving their opinion on the statement ranging from:

I dislike it	I can tolerate it	I don't care	I expect it	I like it
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The answers for the paired statements are then put in the Kano matrix in order to cluster the 14 elements or statements in the aforementioned categories: A, O, M, I and R.

Aside from the 14 pairs of statements, 3 demo graphical questions were asked to determine the age, gender and education of the participants. There were also 2 bonus questions used to determine whether the participant was enrolled in an university and whether someone in their immediate family was enrolled or is thinking of enrolling. A blank space was left to allow for a comment on 'What makes a good university?'

#### Participants:

68 surveys were completed. They were handed out in the main Zagreb Square, Zagreb Hospital Rebro, Nursing Home and The Zagreb Medical University. As such the results show a great demographic range.

## **Results:**

In order to best ascertain the results of the survey each statement will be individually analyzed and then assigned their cluster of: Must be, One dimensional, Attractive or Indifferent.

### **1) The professors are famous names in their field.**

**The professors aren't famous names in their field.**

The surveys opening question and as such the first to have its results analyzed showed that averages can not be blindly trusted. With 23 participants answering that they do not care and 30 that they would like them to be famous names we are met with an average that would say that near all participants expect the professors to be famous names, however that number is much lower resting at only 9.

What this all means for us is that near half of the participants truly don't care about how famous or not famous the professors are while for the other half this would be a 'star quality.'

### **2) The professors create collegial and open relationships with the students.**

**The professors don't create collegial and open relationships with the students.**

A very clear example of a 'One Dimensional' result with all the answers in the functional form being 'like it' and 'expect it' and 57 of the answers in the dysfunctional form being 'don't like it'.

This means that the more and the better the relationships a college creates with its students the more will the public enjoy it.

### **3) The lectures and the curriculum prepare students for a career in the real world.**

**The lectures and the curriculum don't prepare students for a career in the real world.**

The functional form of this question received only 'like' and 'expect' answers with a majority being 'expect'. The dysfunctional was an overwhelming 'dislike'.

This means that the preparation a college does for a students career is a 'must be' for the public and the lack of thereof is a big minus in the eyes of the public.

### **4) It's easy to enroll and everyone can get in.**

**It's hard to enroll and not everyone can get in.**

This is a question where both forms of the statement can be analyzed as functional or dysfunctional. In both cases the average result showed that the public is indifferent to the enrollment standards of colleges.

However when looking only at the 40 (out of 67) participants that answered that they 'dislike' the fact that a university is easy to enroll and that they 'expect' it to be hard to enroll we can see a different and perhaps more honest result that shows that high enrollment standards are a 'must be' in universities.

**5) Students can be creative in their work.  
Student's can't be creative in their work.**

Another example of the average not being the most truthful result albeit not as exaggerated as in the previous question. Here we see that this would be a 'one dimensional' requirement rather than a 'must be' when ignoring the 6 participants that stated that they do not care about how creative the students can be therefore dragging the result from 'one dimensional' to 'must be'.

**6) Students can get good jobs quickly after graduating (within 6 months).  
Students can't get good jobs quickly after graduating (within 6 months).**

Similar to the question above the average shows a 'one dimensional' result however it can also be looked as a 'must be' for the 24 participants that answered that this is something they 'expect' rather than 'like'.

**7) Almost all students that enroll also graduate.  
It's hard to graduate and not everyone will graduate.**

This was a very divisive statement and a statement that allowed for freedom in interpreting what exactly is functional or dysfunctional. Choosing the ease of graduation as the functional statement yielded the result that for 22 of the participants this was a 'star quality'; something attractive that would push them towards enrolling.

However, choosing that graduation shouldn't be easy as the functional statement showed that now this was a 'star quality' for 6 participants.

The rest of the results show indifference to the statement.

**8) The professors publish research papers/books in their field and attend conferences.  
The professors don't publish research papers/books in their field and don't attend conferences.**

13 of the participants are indifferent towards the statement with everyone else seeing it as a 'must be'.

**9) Students enjoy their studies and find them fun.  
Students find their studies boring.**

One of the statements with the clearest result. Other than 7 who are indifferent towards the fun students have (5 of them students themselves) this is a 'one dimensional' result for everyone else. The more fun the better.

**10) The institution offers help with career development, meeting potential employees and coops.**

**The institution doesn't offer help in a students search for a job.**

The result for this statement is shown to be 'one dimensional' however very closely bordering 'star quality' for 44 participants. 20 consider it a 'must be' and 3 are 'indifferent'.

**11) Professors hold high academic titles.**

**Professors don't hold high academic titles.**

For 54 participants this is 'one dimensional' (bordering with 'must be'). The remaining 17 are both students and adults who are indifferent.

**12) Students have the freedom of creating and expressing their own thoughts and ideas.**

**Students don't have the freedom of creating and expressing their own thoughts and ideas.**

Other than the 5 students and 3 adults who are indifferent towards the freedom of opinion and speech all other participants overwhelmingly find it to be a 'must be'.

**13) The institution is ranked high on the national categorization list.**

**The institution is ranked low on the national categorization list.**

This is a specific statement for the Croatian public and examples were provided in the original survey. 8 participants were 'indifferent' to this statement with the rest finding it to be a 'must be'.

**14) The institution controls and sanctions cheating during all academic activities.**

**The institution 'turns a blind eye' to cheating.**

This statement was the first and only to have participants that clearly did not read the questions correctly with a grand total of 10 participants answering 'I dislike it' to both these statements yielding a 'questionable' result. Surprisingly 6 participants (all current students) are indifferent towards cheating. The remaining 51 participants find intolerance towards cheating to be a 'must be'.

Must Be	One-Dimensional	Attractive 'Star Quality'	Indifferent
Prepare for real world	Open and collegial relationships with professors	Professors are famous names in their field	Professors are famous names in their field
Professors publish / attend conferences	Professors hold high academic titles	Easy to graduate	Easy to graduate
Students can be creative and free to express ideas	Quick jobs (within 6 months)	Hard to graduate	Hard to graduate
Institution high rank	Institution helps with job search	Institution helps with job search	Enrollment standards
Intolerance to cheating	Students have fun		

## **Discussion:**

So who won? The old and traditional temple of knowledge; The longstanding and esteemed European University? Or the student centered institution?

Neither truly did. Our sample of the public, albeit limited, did what the public often does and split into groups. Some praising the famous names an institution has and insisting they continue to publish and grow, others content with a place where they (or in some cases their children) could form meaningful relationships with their mentors before (quickly) walking into a good job. Some longing for star professors with definitive works whose passing grade might as well be a badge of honor. Others wanting an almost home where a fun and comfortable experience will lull them into a career.

However some things do ring true among the great majority and they present themselves as fundamental requirements for a Croatian university.

The university has to be state recognized on a high level. A safe and welcoming environment where qualified professionals prepare the scholars for the real world, with no tolerance towards cheating.

This must be the very begging for aspiring institutions and those who skipped this part must go back to do it, without expecting applause however for these are seen as the most basic requirements.

What does this mean for the Croatian private institution? If your name is not Libertas International University it means "go put the steering wheel in your car" or "go get your university status authorized" as the aforementioned is the only one in the country holding the title. Others are classified as polytechnics or technical colleges.

Alongside having 'university' in its name the people also expect the professors to be active in their field and to prepare the students for the real world while allowing them to express and be free.

Once those requirements are met a crossroad opens where a choice must be made. We have learned that there are at least two obvious groups between whose contradictory ideas the institution must choose and the answer must be found from within the institution.

An isomorphic culture means doubling down on what it has. Publish more and write more and become elite through names and research. One comment from a doctor and a mother thinking of enrolling her child stated that collaboration between institution in the name of science and research was the key for a good university and a isomorphic private institution can offer that and more.

A smaller market oriented institution should amplify its connections with its industry and hire not based on names but personality and willingness to connect with the people who enroll. Allow your perhaps not so famous professors to be free from some (but not all) academic obligations so that they can have the time and will to help anyone who needs help.

Ultimately it means choosing a path and staying true to it and to those who come along for the journey. Once this is completed the market will recognize.

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